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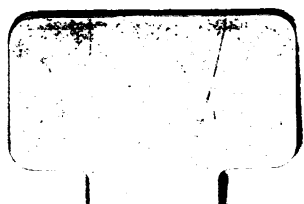
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THE STAGE.

ADDRESS

DELIVERED BY

MR. HENRY IRVING

AT THE

PERRY BARR INSTITUTE, NEAR BIRMINGHAM,

ON

MARCH 6th, 1878.



*Any profit derived from the sale of this Pamphlet will be appropriated to
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ADDRESS.

STANDING here, as I do, in succession to distinguished men with whom it would be arrogance to compare myself, it is natural that a feeling of affectionate reverence should come over me for the art to which my life has been devoted. To it I owe all. To it, not least of all, I owe the honour of speaking to you to-day. It were strange if I could forget, or at such moment prefer any other theme than the immemorial and perpetual association of the stage with the noblest instincts and occupations of the human mind.

If I talked to you of poetry, must I not remember how to the measure of its lofty music the theatre has in almost all ages set the grandest of dramatic conceptions? If I dilated upon literature, must I not recall that of all the amusements by which men in various states of society have solaced their leisure and refreshed their energies, the acting of plays is the one that has never yet, even for a day, been divorced from literary taste and skill? If I discoursed of patriotism, I could not but reflect how grandly the boards have been

trod by personifications of heroic love of country. There is no subject of human thought that by common consent is deemed ennobling that has not ere now, and from period to period, been illustrated in the bright vesture, and received expression from the glowing language of theatrical representation. What should I do then, an actor privileged to address such an institution as yours, but magnify my proper office, and, if necessary, vindicate my art from imputations and detraction?

To efficiency in the art of acting, there should come a congregation of fine qualities. There should be considerable though not always systematic culture. There should be delicate instincts of taste cultivated, consciously or unconsciously, to a degree of extreme and subtle nicety. There should be a power at once refined and strong, of both perceiving and expressing to others the significance of language, so that neither shades nor masses of meaning—so to speak—may be either lost or exaggerated. Above all, there should be a sincere and abounding sympathy with all that is good and great and inspiring. That sympathy, most certainly, must be under the control and manipulation of art, but it must be none the less real and generous, and the artist who is a mere artist will stop short of the highest moral effects of his craft.

Yet the profession of which this is true has lived, and not merely in Puritan countries or countries

where what religion there is is Puritan, has lived with many under a moral ban. There are reasons for this—reasons based in the tendencies of art-life, in the forbidding tenacity of sanctimonious prejudices, and in the lower exigencies of an art which is also a costly and risky enterprise, nightly dependent on the favour and the money of the public. But the principal reason is one which certainly does not entitle the world to judge harshly of the players.

If those who live to please must please to live, their power of sustaining the taste and tone of their patrons is sharply and narrowly limited by the very conditions of their existence and their work. Tracing the history of the drama, it would be easy to show that, though in reaction the stage may have aggravated the vices of society, it has always been society that has first vitiated the stage, and that actors and managers have been slow rather than quick in consenting to that debasement of their art for which a depraved public appetite has too often craved.

Before defending the moral influence of the theatre, however, it may be necessary to dispose of a most depreciatory view of it which lies nearer the root of the question of its utility. From a variety of causes has arisen a foolish inclination to undervalue acting as an interpreting and illustrative art—to be sceptical as to its inspirations—to question the service which it renders in realizing

to the mind and the heart the conceptions of great poets. It is thought by some to be a mark of superiority to say that one appreciates Shakspeare far more in reading him than in seeing him acted. Well, this is a cheap badge of superiority, whatever may be its worth. No one need be without the gratification of self-esteem, and if a man can worship himself on a pedestal at the inappreciable cost of a conceited and silly delusion by all means let him enjoy his inexpensive privilege. But what does it amount to ?

It clearly assumes, to begin with, that an unprepared reader, whose mind is usually full of far other things, will see, on the instant, all that has been developed in hundreds of years by the members of a studious and enthusiastic profession. It should surely be allowed that a man whose business it is to comprehend and represent dramatic authors may have acquired, in the mere routine of his business, at least such aptitude for perceiving points and bearings as we should concede to a conveyancer who had spent his life in scrutinizing title-deeds. And if you urge that such an actor will be exceedingly conventional and follow well-beaten tracks, at least let it be allowed, that his favourite traditions have been arrived at long ago by the study and practice of trained intellects, and that the tracks he treads have been marked out with the best available skill and judgment and are the survivals of a process by which the stage is

constantly effacing by disuse the mistakes of former times. I am the last man to admire a slavish or even an unthinking adherence to the interpretations and conceptions of tradition. My own conviction is that there are few characters or passages of our great dramatists which will not repay original study. But at least we must recognize the vast advantages with which a trained actor, impregnated with all the practical and critical skill of his profession up to the date at which he appears, addresses himself to the interpretation of any great poetical name, even if he have no originality whatever.

But there is something more than this in acting. There is a natural dramatic fertility in every one who has the smallest histrionic gift; so that as soon as he knows the author's text and obtains self-possession, and feels at home in a part without being too familiar with it, the mere automatic action of rehearsing and playing it at once begins to place the author in new lights and to give the personage being played an individuality partly independent of, and yet consistent with, and rendering more powerfully visible the dramatist's conception. It is the vast power a good actor has in this way which has led the French to speak of creating a part when they mean its being first played; and French authors are so conscious of the extent and value of this co-operation of actors with them that they have never objected to the phrase, but, on the

contrary, are uniformly lavish in their homage to the artists who have created on the boards the parts which they themselves have created on paper.

By no one has this aspect of the player's art been more admirably exhibited than by Mr. Theodore Martin, whose sensibilities on the subject may well be chivalrously quickened by affectionate admiration for his wife, a most distinguished actress. He has told us, in the *Quarterly Review*, that without the living comment and interpretation of fine acting, dramatic literature in its highest forms must be a sealed book to us. "We may indeed," says he, "think that we see all the significance of a great conception. We may imagine, as so many people obviously do, that actual impersonation will never make us better acquainted with Imogen, Rosalind, Portia, Othello, Macbeth or Coriolanus than our own unaided study has done. There can be no greater mistake. Plays are written, not to be read, but to be seen and heard. No reader, be his imagination ever so active, can therefore thoroughly understand a finely-conceived character or a great play until he has seen them on the stage. The dramatic poet himself may be independent of what it is the office of the stage to perform in giving completeness to his conception, but no one else can be. He knows that words can never paint the passions of the soul, whether in sun-

shine or in storm—can never suggest the infinitely subtle phases of emotion like an accent, a gesture, or a look. By the very nature of his genius he feels intuitively where silence is most eloquent, where the passion-charged utterance of the simplest phrase can do more than torrents of imagery ; and as he writes, he fills up the pauses and breaks of emotion with the appropriate look and tones and action of his ideal forms. Therefore does he leave much for the actor to do ; knowing well that if he did not, however his dialogues might sparkle, or his periods glow, his work would not be one to move an audience.”

And then this writer goes on to say how pre-eminently this is true of Shakspeare, and quotes Steele, in the *Tatler*, on the handkerchief scene in “Othello,” where that fine and genial critic confesses that unless a man have almost as warm an imagination as the poet himself, he cannot in privately reading that scene find any but dry, incoherent and broken sentences ; but that a reader that had seen Betterton act it, perceives that not a word could be added—the actor’s gift being here the complement of the poet’s genius. Mr. Martin tells us, too, how Madame de Stael called Talma the second author of the pieces that he played ; how the author of “the Grecian Daughter,” when he saw Mrs. Siddons act Euphrasia, exclaimed, “What is this ? I never wrote that scene !” and how Shakspeare himself might have felt similarly,

had he heard Garrick say, "Prithee undo this button," in "Lear," or the elder Kean's, "Fool, fool, fool!" in "Othello." And I cannot help quoting from a late number of the *Nineteenth Century* some admirable remarks upon this subject by Mr. Fleeming Jenkin. He writes,

"In truth the spectators do not know the marvellous study which a great actor applies to every word of a speech. Some think that the study consists in finding out what the author meant the hero to say or express by given words. Sometimes this demands study ; more often with great writers it is as plain as can be, requiring no study. When the meaning is understood, next comes the consideration of the feeling which the speech implies or requires in the speaker. The conception of this is far more difficult than the simple interpretation of the words, and will alter with each new actor ; not differing *toto cœlo*, but differing in shade, colour, and intensity. Any one of us can understand the reasoning in 'To be or not to be.' Very few of us can form any vivid conception of the state of Hamlet's mind, sentence by sentence, word by word, as he utters them. Of the few who can form any conception beyond a mere colourless, shadeless, pointless impression of gloom or bitterness, each one must of necessity form a distinct and new conception. In order that such a speech may sway a house, it must represent a series of emotions, each intense, natural,

and noble—each succeeding the other in a natural sequence. After the speech has been understood and the feelings to which it corresponds conceived, comes a task of ineffable difficulty—that of finding tones, look, and action, which shall represent those feelings. The author gives an outline, which the actor must fill up with colour, light and shade, so as to show a concrete fact ; and no two actors can or ought to do this in one and the same way. Let any reader who doubts this—who thinks, for instance, that there is some one Hamlet—Shakspeare's Hamlet—who could only speak the speech in one attitude, with one set of tones—open the book, and in the solitude of his chamber try first to find out the emotions which Shakspeare meant his Hamlet to feel, and then try to express those emotions in tones which would indicate them to others. If honest and clever, he will find out after half an hour's study how little the author has done for the actor, how much the actor is called upon to do for the author." Believe me, acting is serious work—much more serious than many people suppose. The player's command over the resources of his art seems such an easy matter that some are apt to run away with the idea that no very great amount of study is necessary to attain equal excellence. Far be it from me to disparage amateurs—for all actors have been amateurs at some time—but I am bound to say that they often imagine that acting requires

infinitely less mental exertion than any other art. If you listen to the conversation at a dinner-table when it turns upon the stage, you will learn amongst other surprising matters that the one thing in the world which a man can do without any trouble is to act.

Grant that any of us understand a dramatist better for seeing him acted, and it follows, first, that all of us will be most indebted to the stage at the point where the higher and more ethereal faculties are liable in reading to failure and exhaustion: that is, stage playing will be of most use to us where the mind requires help and inspiration to grasp and revel in lofty moral or imaginative conceptions, or where it needs aid and sharpening to appreciate and follow the niceties of repartee, or the delicacies of comic fancy.

Secondly, it follows that if this is so with the intellectual few, it must be infinitely more so with the unimaginative many of all ranks. They are not inaccessible to passion and poetry and refinement, but their minds do not go forth, as it were, to seek these joys, and even if they read works of poetic and dramatic fancy, which they rarely do, they would miss them on the printed page. To them, therefore, with the exception of a few startling incidents of real life, the theatre is the only channel through which are ever brought the great sympathies of the world of thought beyond their immediate ken.

And thirdly, it follows from all this that the stage is, intellectually and morally, to all who have recourse to it the source of some of the finest and best influences of which they are respectively susceptible. To the thoughtful and reading man it brings the life, the fire, the colour, the vivid instinct, which are beyond the reach of study. To the common, indifferent man, immersed as a rule in the business and socialities of daily life, it brings visions of glory and adventure, of emotion and of broad human interest. It gives him glimpses of the heights and depths of character and experience, setting him thinking and wondering even in the midst of amusement. To the most torpid and unobservant it exhibits the humourous in life and the sparkle and finesse of language, which in dull ordinary existence is stupidly shut out of knowledge or omitted from particular notice. To all it uncurtains a world, not that in which they live and yet not other than it—a world in which interest is heightened and yet the conditions of truth are observed, in which the capabilities of men and women are seen developed without losing their consistency to nature, and developed with a curious and wholesome fidelity to simple and universal instincts of clear right and wrong.

The language which I have now used is intended to be recited before an intellectual and thinking audience, and may seem at the first blush to be too ambitious and subtle to express the ordinary

effects of stage performances on playgoers. What I say is, however, that where theatrical representations are enjoyed, whether in high or low phases of society, these sensations mental and moral are experienced, and their true quality should be recognized. Fortunately the facts can be stated in much simpler terms and, so stated, must be acknowledged by all who are not under the influence of prejudice. Some time ago I had an opportunity, such as is not often vouchsafed to members of my profession, of asserting the moral value of the theatre before a clerical audience. I am bound to say that my experience of the clergy has been not only most gratifying, but such as to convince me that the prejudice against the stage, as the stage, is fast dying away. A strong proof of a fair mindedness most honourable to ministers of religion labouring among the masses, was afforded to me when I was asked to go to the East end of London, and there to vindicate, before a clerical assemblage, an institution which the prejudices of English religion had long ranked among the enemies of virtue. It was then that I was enabled to put broadly and popularly my firm belief that, go where you will in England, dramatic performances, though they may not always be what we might desire, are elevating and not degrading in their influence.

In that address—to which I may be excused for referring, for one's ideas on such a subject are

fixed, and can only be reproduced from time to time as the lesson needs to be re-taught and insisted on—I alluded to certain associations which were still supposed by the uninformed to be attached to theatrical amusements, which associations have been almost entirely swept out of the audience portion of our theatres in these days, and such establishments are entitled to be judged, not by notions of what goes on in them which date from the time before Macready, but by the character of their performances, and even more than this by the actual relation of those performances, in reference to moral tone, to the minds of those who attend them. That a great prejudice does still exist against the theatre as a theatre—I mean a building—is proved by the fact that thousands of people do witness plays at the Crystal Palace, who have a religious conviction that theatres ought to be shunned. How few and faint are the specially good influences which operate upon the poorest people of our great towns! How slight their education, their reading, and their observance of religion! By comparison how frequent and sympathetic their attendance at minor theatres. Well, then, it is of great importance to know, and it cannot be denied by actual observers, that the main stream of dramatic sentiment in all veins and especially in pieces intended for the most popular audiences is pure, tender, equitable and in a sense religious. What-

ever the stage does there is at least no mistake about. Its effect is immediate and direct. What is unpopular will not go down. That simple manly virtue, fine justice, natural reverence, and all the better feelings of our nature are acceptable and accepted on the stage, proves that there is here a natural opportunity for doing good which is actually made use of, and thus is raised a strong presumption that good is done.

From this point I went on to plead that the moral tone of the stage must not be assumed either from its necessarily being regulated by the demand for amusement, or from its inevitably exhibiting immorality and villany as elements in human action and incident. There is no meeting those who consider it frivolous to be amused and wicked to be thus frivolous. Be it elegant or be it rude, be it moral or immoral, be it intellectual or idiotic, the theatre must always be before all things a place of amusement. For that you must make up your mind. In that medium you must work. Through that channel you must get all the good the stage can yield. In this discussion there is no room for those who, according to Macaulay, objected to bear-baiting, not because it hurt the bear, but because it pleased the people.

As to the other and more debateable point—whether it is permissible to exhibit wickedness in dramatic form—we must be equally plain. “If there be any” I ventured to say in the address to

which I am referring—"If there be any who are for veiling from human sight all developments of evil, they indeed must turn from the theatre door, and must desire to see the footlights put out. But they must also close Shakspeare, avoid Fielding, Dickens, Thackeray, George Eliot; pronounce Kingsley immoral, and, so far as I can understand, read only parts of their Bible. It is not by hiding evil, but by showing it to us alongside of good that human character is trained and perfected. There is no step of man or woman, whether halting and feeble, or firm and strong, that the Divine government guarantees against stumbling-blocks and slips. But amidst all the moral dangers and stumbling-blocks of life, there are to be found in every refining influence known to mankind—and on the stage as much as in the noblest poetry and teaching—bright lights for guidance, sweet words of encouragement, comprehended even by the most ignorant—glowing pictures of virtue and devotion, which bring the world of high thoughts and bright lives into communion and fellowship with the sphere of simple, and perhaps coarse, day-to-day existence."

If it is metaphorically the destiny of humanity, it is literally the experience of an actor, that one man in his time plays many parts. A player of any standing must at various times have sounded the gamut of human sensibility from its lowest note to the top of its compass. He must have banqueted often on curious food for thought as he meditated

on the subtle relations created between himself and his audiences, as they have watched in his impersonations the shifting tariff—the ever gliding, delicately graduated sliding-scale of dramatic right and wrong. He may have gloated, if he be a cynic, over the depths of ghastly horror, or the vagaries of moral puddle through which it may have been his duty to plash. But if he be an honest man, he will acknowledge that scarcely ever has either dramatist or management wilfully biassed the effect of stage representation in favour of evil, and of his audiences he will boast that never has their mind been doubtful—never has their true perception of the generous and just been known to fail, or even to be slow. How noble the privilege to work upon these finer—these finest—feelings of universal humanity ! How engrossing the fascination of those thousands of steady eyes, and sound sympathies, and beating hearts which an actor confronts, with the confidence of friendship and co-operation, as he steps upon the stage to work out in action his long pent comprehension of a noble masterpiece ! How rapturous the satisfaction of abandoning himself, in such a presence and with such sympathizers, to his author's grandest flights of thought and noblest bursts of emotional inspiration ! And how perpetually sustaining the knowledge that whatever may be the vicissitudes and even the degradations of the stage, it must and will depend for its constant hold on the affection

and attention of mankind upon its loftier work ; upon its more penetrating passion ; upon its themes which most deeply search out the strong affections and high hopes of men and women ; upon its fit and kindling illustration of great and vivid lives which either have been lived in noble fact or have deserved to endure immortally in the popular belief and admiration which they have secured.

Call them from the dead
For our eyes to see !
Sons of wisdom, song and power,
Giving earth her richest dower,
And making nations free—
A glorious company !

Call them from the dead
For our eyes to see !
Forms of beauty, love and grace,
“ Sunshine in the shady place,”
That made it life to be—
A blessed company !

A defence of the stage such as this is a defence, not, be it observed, of some lofty ideal of what might be, but what is, wherever there are pit and gallery and footlights. More or less, and taking one evening with another, you may find support for my enthusiastic theory of stage morality and the high tone of audiences in most theatres in the country ; and if you fancy that it is least so in the theatres frequented by the poor you make a great mistake, for in none is the appreciation of good moral fare more marked than in these. And

surely the least consideration of such facts should dispel the idea that stage plays require to be jealously regarded as possible foes to public morality.

In reference to the poorer classes we all lament the wide prevalence of intemperate drinking. Well, is it not an obvious reflection that the worst performance seen on any of our stages cannot be so bad as drinking for a corresponding time in a gin palace. I have pointed this contrast before, and I point it again. The drinking we deplore takes place in company—bad company; it is enlivened by talk—bad talk. It is relished by obscenity. Where drink and low people come together these things must be. The worst that can come of stage pandering to the corrupt tastes of its basest patrons cannot be anything like this, and as a rule the stage holds out long against the invitation to pander, and such invitations, from the publicity and decorum that attends the whole matter, are neither frequent nor eager. A sort of decency sets in upon the coarsest person, even in entering the roughest theatre. I have sometimes thought that, considering the liability to descend and the facility of descent, a special Providence watches over the morals and tone of our English stage.

I might inundate you with authorities to show how consonant the preservation of the moral virtues of the stage is with the best ideals of the best men.

"A man who enters the theatre" wrote David Hume, "is immediately struck with the view of so great a multitude participating of one common amusement; and experiences from their very aspect, a superior sensibility or disposition of being affected with every sentiment which he shares with his fellow creatures." "The theatre," says the greatest of Germans (the noble poet Goethe)—"The theatre has often been at variance with the pulpit. They ought not to quarrel. How much is it to be wished that the celebration of nature and of God were entrusted to none but men of noble minds!" Collier, one of the bitterest opponents of the actual theatre at the time of its grossest abasement, yet confesses that the proper business of plays is "to recommend virtue and discountenance vice; to show the uncertainty of human greatness, the sudden turns of fate, and the unhappy conclusions of violence and injustice. 'Tis to expose the singularities of pride and fancy, to make folly and falsehood contemptible, and to bring everything that is ill under infamy and neglect." But it is superfluous to accumulate testimonies of this kind. I would rather address myself for a few moments to a candid view of the drawbacks of the theatre as it now exists among us.

There never was a time when the faults of the stage were not conspicuous. There never was a time when they were not freely admitted by those most concerned for the maintenance of the stage

at its best. In Shakspeare, whenever the subject of the theatre is approached, we perceive signs that that great spirit, though it had a practical and business-like vein and essayed no impossible enterprises, groaned under the necessities, or at least the demands of a public which insisted on or at least desired frivolities and deformities which jarred upon the poet-manager's feelings. He was probably smarting under the perverted taste of his public when he made Trinculo say:—

A strange fish! Were I in England now (as once I was) and had but this fish painted, not a holiday fool there but would give a piece of silver; there would this monster make a man; any strange beast there makes a man, when they will not give a doit to relieve a lame beggar, they will lay out ten to see a dead Indian.

As we descend the course of time we find that each generation looked back to a supposed previous period when taste ranged higher and when the inferior and offensive peculiarities of the existing stage were unknown. You all know how bitterly Lord Byron resented the declension of the stage at a time which we now regard as much superior in in tone and productive power to our own. Many of the allusions are not now comprehensible, but if you substitute for them illustrations of later date which may occur to you, you will listen with interest to the great poet's vigorous denunciation:—

Now to the Drama turn—oh! motley sight!
 What precious scenes the wondering eyes invite!
 Puns and a prince within a barrel pent,
 And Dibdin's nonsense, yield complete content.
 Though now, thank Heaven, the Rosciomania's o'er
 And full-grown actors are endured once more,
 Yet what avail their vain attempts to please,
 While British critics suffer scenes like these.

* * * *

Who but must mourn, while these are all the rage,
 The degradation of our vaunted stage?
 Heavens! is all sense of shame and talent gone?
 Have we no living bard of merit? None?
 Awake! George Colman! Cumberland, awake!
 Ring the alarum bell! Let folly quake!
 Oh! Sheridan, if aught can move thy pen
 Let Comedy assume her throne again.
 Abjure the mummery of the German schools;
 Leave new Pizarros to translating fools.
 Give, as thy last memorial to the age,
 One classic drama, and reform the stage.
 Gods! o'er those boards shall Folly rear her head,
 Where Garrick trod and Siddons lives to tread?
 On those shall Farce display Buffoonery's mask,
 And Hook conceal his heroes in a cask?
 Shall sapient managers new scenes produce,
 From Cherry, Skeffington, and Mother Goose?
 While Shakspeare, Otway, Massinger, forgot,
 On stalls must moulder, or in closets rot?
 Lo, with what pomp the daily prints proclaim
 The rival candidates for Attic fame!

* * * *

While poor John Bull, bewildered with the scene
 Stares, wondering what the devil it can mean;
 But as some hands applaud—a venal few!
 Rather than sleep, why, John applauds it, too.
 Such are we now. Ah! wherefore should we turn
 To what our fathers were, unless to mourn?
 Degenerate Britons! are ye dead to shame?

Or, kind to dulness, do you fear to blame?
 Well may the nobles of our present race
 Watch each distortion of a Naldi's face;
 Well may they smile on Italy's buffoons,
 And worship Catalani's pantaloons,
 Since their own drama yields no fairer trace
 Of wit than puns, of humour than grimace.

This is a very black and savage picture, and similar pictures have since had truth in them; but we may contemplate it to better advantage than merely to apply it with differences to things within our own memories. Not many years after Lord Byron had written this came the admirable lesseeship of Macready, with its grand contributions, both to the literature of the stage and the character of the theatre. Byron's "Werner" and "Sardanapalus" were impersonated by Macready, an actor I never had the good fortune to see, but who was not, I believe and am told, unworthy of the best days of the stage, though pursued during a part of his career by shafts of malignity which fastened on the original genius which was his glory. And the world remembers Bulwer's "Richelieu" and "Money," Knowles's "William Tell," Milman's "Fazio," Talfourd's "Ion," Taylor's "Van Artevelde," and a host of other fine plays, among the subsequent fruits of a tree which Lord Byron had considered dead. The truth is that the immortal part of the stage is its nobler part. Ignoble accidents and interludes come and go, but this lasts on for ever. It lives like the human soul in the

body of humanity—associated with much that is inferior, and hampered by many hindrances—but it never sinks into nothingness, and never fails to find new and noble work in creations of permanent and memorable excellence.

We must all admit, however, that the backslidings of the stage are often gross. Heaven forbid that I should seem to cover, even with a counterpane of courtesy, exhibitions of deliberate immorality. It is, unhappily, too true, that in aiming at the tastes of those lovers of pleasure with whom, unhappily, the stage has been too long and too freely associated, theatrical managers have now and then been tempted to offer to vulgar delectation performances which, with the utmost charity, cannot be regarded as innocent in intention. Sometimes their bad attraction has consisted in a reckless and deliberate disregard for the decencies of costume. This is a matter about which it is easy to be prudish, and about which it is difficult to lay down rules. There is nothing in all nature purer than a *Rosalind* or an *Imogen*, and, if rightly treated, these characters are all the more striking from their appearance in male attire; but the slightest departure from the most modest taste, the faintest shade of meretricious, not to say indecorous, dressing is fatal. And what is ruinous in such parts as these is in its degree obnoxious and damaging in all stage representations whatever. It is when there is any intentional catering for a

gross animal taste, such as a man only falls into in his worse moments, and even in his worse moments veils almost from himself, evil is present—evil of an intolerable kind—evil that ought promptly to be resented by the public, and summarily to be condemned by criticism. Happily this sort of thing is not common, and although it has hardly been practised by any one who without a strain of meaning can be associated with the profession of acting, yet public censure, not active enough to repress the evil, is ever ready to pass a sweeping condemnation on the stage which harbours it. You know that if an ignorant supernumerary robs her lodgings, though she may never have uttered a word on the stage in her life, we are pretty sure to find some paragraph headed “Theft by an Actress;” and if a gross-minded or mercenary manager panders to what he supposes to be the taste of the crowd by providing spectacles and dances in which decency is but little regarded, it is perhaps inevitable that the drama should be discredited.

But this is not all. There is a danger of producing plays the whole structure of which is impregnated with moral unhealthiness. It would be taken very ill if I were to particularize; I can only speak in more or less general terms. But it is to be feared that in endeavouring to obtain from the great storehouse of French invention attractive adaptations to suit certain tastes in the present day,

there has been sometimes a lamentable indifference as to the moral quality of the imported wares. They have been glossed over and refined by the grace of those who act in them. They have been coarsened by the comparatively rough and broad handling of the English stage. But the essential characteristic of these pieces is that they make a mock of domestic purity. They efface from the minds of spectators the line which, according to good old English ideas, distinguish a foul from a fair life. They inoculate the feminine mind with rakishness. They establish usages of confidence and familiarity as to certain deplorable incidents of civilization and society which between good men and chaste women are best avoided. And they cover so absolutely with gay ridicule the common-places of profligacy, that they become part and parcel of the freemasonry of that decent society in which they should never even be heard.

Our stage has during two periods suffered this degradation, but the manners which it then reflected have been purified, and heaven forbid that the past evils should be restored. The stage whose cause I plead is that which Shakspeare worked for and made immortal. It is that which he would religiously have preserved, in defiance of all current immoral tastes. I advocate the stage, as at its best it is among us; as it may be in every theatre in the kingdom; as it would be if you, the public, would make it so. I

have no desire to excuse the blemishes and abuses of a noble profession. Happily, faults such as I have condemned are rare. They have been few and far between even on the London stage, and are seldom, believe me, in favour with actors. They wince acutely and immediately at even the barest suggestion of evil in the parts assigned to them. They often privately prophesy failure on this account, where unhappily the low taste of a paying public in the event secures success. And, however, in the course of a trying profession, they may be called upon to overstep the necessarily somewhat indefinite line of absolute propriety, it is, I can answer for it, the firmest persuasion and deepest feeling of the best of them that if the public would mark that line more distinctly it would be greatly for the benefit of the stage and all its interests.

At the same time the public have, I admit, a right to exact of theatrical managers a certain scrupulosity which has not always been forthcoming. He must suit the taste of the day sufficiently to fill his theatre, but he is no more entitled to offer the public coarse and indelicate, or insidiously immoral entertainment, than is a grocer to sell arsenically tinted tea, or a brush-seller to vend stolen brooms. Common morality must enter into all businesses. If managers without a thought of moral responsibility, without consideration for the modesty and self-respect of

their companies, are to make lower and lower experiments of the capacity of the public for gross delights, where shall we stop? Surely it is a most degrading theory of a most honourable office to suppose that a manager who makes no effort to raise the taste of the people is entitled to throw on his patrons the responsibility of any scandal and debasement which arises from his fishing in the troubled waters of their lower appetites !

What a contrast is presented by such a career as that of a most venerated member of our profession—Mr. Phelps. Having devoted himself to his art with all the ardour of enthusiasm, aided by the practical sagacity of a shrewd man of business—Mr. Greenwood—it was his deliberate ambition and enterprise to establish the legitimate drama in a centre where it had never been known. The short-sighted protectionist notions of art which existed till within a comparatively few years ago prevented the representation of a worthy order of dramatic pieces—prevented the establishment of proper theatres except under monopoly patents—and the suburbs of London were condemned to stinted and unwholesome entertainments. Almost as soon as the restriction was withdrawn, Mr. Phelps undertook to create a classic theatre at Sadler's Wells, where previously there had been nothing but clowning and spectacle. He found the place in the barbarous condition to which such

a training of taste might naturally lead. Not only did it seem preposterous to suppose that the Clerkenwell and Islington audiences would ever be brought to take a remunerative interest in the best plays and playing, but the vilest uproars, the grossest disorders used to occur in the building nightly, so that it is an early tradition of Mr. Phelps's lesseeship that he had actually to throw a cloak over his theatrical dress and rush up into the gallery in order to secure something like decorum and quiet. But he stuck to his text, and that text was for the most part the text of Shakspeare. He found some of the best of our actors willing to aid him. He trained others. He did not suffer the roughness of his audience to tempt him into mean or slipshod production. He tried upon them the effect of fine scenery, picturesque decorations, grand effects, but all subordinated loyally to noble acting, to just elocution, to original and powerful conceptions and interpretations of the greatest works. You may know how surely and, comparatively speaking, how rapidly he triumphed—how scarcely a great play of Shakspeare, or, indeed, any great author was omitted from his unprecedented list of classical revivals—how that same gallery which at first roared itself hoarse while the play went on in dumb-show, became hushed in rapt admiration; how between the acts the theatre became one humming æsthetic debating party, in which points of acting and interpretation were debated with

the keenest interest; how its fame spread on the wings of the press throughout the whole world of English speech, and how in fact it became, by force of mere popular success, a classical national theatre more truly than any that was ever established by means of royal patronage or imperial subventions. Mr. Phelps has much to be proud of in the artistic creations of his histrionic power, and scarcely less in this great historic encouragement, secured for ever by his faith and patience, to all who labour in the same cause.

The cause is a good one. We go forth, armed with the luminous panoply which genius has forged for us, to do battle with dulness, with coarseness, with apathy, with every form of vice and evil. In every human heart there gleams a bright reflection of this shining armour. The stage has no lights or shadows that are not lights of life and shadows of the heart. To each human consciousness it appeals in alternating mirth and sadness, and will not be denied. Err it must, for it is human, and, being human, it must endure. The love of acting is inherent in our nature. Watch your children at play, and you will see that almost their first conscious effort is to act and to imitate. It is an instinct, and you can no more repress it than you can extinguish thought. Some of the earliest drafts of the stage are current still, endorsed by many names of great actors who have not lessened

their credit, and who have increased and quickened their circulation. Some of its latest achievements are not unworthy of their predecessors. Some of its youngest devotees are at least as proud of its glories and as anxious to preserve them as any who have gone before. Theirs is a glorious heritage. I ask you to honour it. They have a noble, but a difficult, and sometimes a disheartening task. I ask you to encourage it. No word of kindly interest or criticism dropped in the public ear from friendly lips goes unregarded or is unfertile of good.

I hope I shall not be thought to be adopting too humble and apologetic a key if I plead for actors, not merely that their labours have honour, but that their lives be regarded with kindly consideration. Their work is hard, intensely laborious—feverish and dangerously exciting. It is all this even when successful. It is often nothing short of heartbreaking when success is missed or sickeningly delayed.

In our art of acting we strive to embody some conception of our poets, or to revive some figure of history. We win if we can. If we fail, we have only "our shame and the odd hits," and, whether we fail or not, the breath of applause and the murmurs of censure are alike short-lived, and our longest triumphs are almost as brief as either.

In the long run of popular remembrance the best reward to be hoped for by those of us who

most succeed is to be cited to unbelieving hearers, when we are dead and gone, as illustrations of the vast superiority of bygone actors to anything that is to be seen on the stage of to-day.

Such a life is fraught with various and insidious temptations, and should be solaced by the thoughtfulness, brightened by the encouragement, softened by the liberal estimation of the public, instead of being held at arm's length by social prejudice, or embittered by uncharitable censoriousness.

We actors have in charge a trust and a deposit of enormous value, such as no dead hand can treasure. Upon our studies, our devotion, our enthusiasm must depend thoughts and emotions of coming times which no literary tradition can pass down to the future. The living voice, the vivid action, the tremulous passion, the animated gesture, the subtle and variously placed suggestion of character and meaning—these alone can make Shakspeare to your children what Shakspeare is to you. Only these can open to others with any spark of Shakspeare's mind the means of illuminating the world. Such is our birthright and yours. Such the succession in which it is ours to labour and yours to enjoy. If you will uphold the stage, honestly, frankly, and with wise discrimination, the stage will uphold in future, as it has in the past, the literature, the manners, the morals and the fame of our country.

But is it not somewhat strange I ask you—is

there not a painful and irritating irony in it—that three hundred years and more after the birth of the man Shakspeare—the DRAMATIST AND ACTOR who has probably added more lustre than any other to the name of Englishman—who has so enriched his native language that we go to his mines of imagery and illustration even for our current phraseology—is it not strange, I ask you, that here in this county of Warwickshire, the place of his birth, and standing on this ground which perhaps he often trod, we should be at this time of day pleading before his countrymen the cause of the stage that he so loved, and of the actors who are his brethren. There must be something wrong, as there is something poignant and lacerating, in prejudices which have thus partly divorced the conscience of England from its noblest pride, and stamped with reproach, or at least depreciation, some of the brightest incidents of her history.

THE STAGE.

ADDRESS

DELIVERED BY

MR. HENRY IRVING

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36

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